

Mentoring matters

Robin Simmons describes research aimed at helping NEET young people access education and training.

I have, over recent years, been involved in a series of research projects examining the experiences of young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) as they try to navigate the margins of education and work. Much of this work has focused on Britain, but I am currently working on the Erasmus+ project *Improving Traditions, Enabling Results* (ITER) with partners from Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Romania as well as the UK. The ITER project examines barriers to participation faced by NEET young people in each nation, and aims to help them move from employability programmes into mainstream vocational education and training.

Being NEET

Employability programmes aim to provide young people with various skills, abilities and dispositions deemed necessary for further education and employment. This might include improving literacy and numeracy skills; building confidence and motivation; boosting aspirations; and helping young people to improve interpersonal or 'soft' skills. Those responsible for delivering such programmes tend to act as mentors rather than 'teachers', and pedagogy is often based on relationship building and trying to reorientate young people to learning. Many of those who take part in such programmes nevertheless struggle to access mainstream education and training, and those who do so are vulnerable to fail or drop out. Perhaps understandably, this can then reinforce or exacerbate negative orientations to education and work (see Eurofound, 2012).

Research I carried out with my Huddersfield colleagues Ron Thompson and Lisa Russell in the north of England revealed that the most common outcome for a young person leaving an employability programme was a return to being NEET, and the second most common outcome was a place on another employability programme, (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014). Data from Northern Ireland suggest that, between 2013-2017, only four per cent of those leaving *Training Skills for Your Life*, an employability programme designed for the most marginalised young people, progressed onto further education or employment and were still

participating 13 weeks later (NISRA, 2021, p.11). Evidence from elsewhere is similarly depressing.

This is problematic in many ways, not least because spending significant periods of time outside education and work can have a significant 'scarring effect' on young people. In other words, there are damaging long-term effects associated with being NEET which extend into adult life. Research conducted by the EU body, Eurofound (2012), shows that those who are long-term NEET are more vulnerable to extended periods of adult unemployment than their peers, and often end up in insecure, poorly-paid jobs when they are able to find work. NEET young people are also more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system; to suffer from poor health; addiction; relationship breakdowns; and other forms of disadvantage than their peers. They are, moreover, less likely to vote, to volunteer, or participate in civil society.

Research by Bob Coles and colleagues at York University (2010) shows that there are also a broader range of social and economic consequences associated with NEET. On the one hand, there are substantial lost tax revenues linked to long-term unemployment, but the scarring effects of being NEET are also related to additional public expenditure on health, social services, welfare benefits and other forms of support. It is therefore understandable that policymakers are concerned with how to engage or re-engage NEET young people in education and work.

The ITER research

Central to the *ITER* research is an exploration of the views and opinions of three sets of participants in each nation:

- NEET-experienced young people
- Mentors who provide advice, guidance and other forms of support to NEET-experienced young people
- Stakeholders responsible for education and youth employment policy at the local and regional level.

The data suggests there are significant differences in the situation facing NEET young

people in different part of Europe. Youth unemployment is, for example, substantially higher in Portugal and Romania than in the UK, and different countries have different ways of funding, organising and delivering education, training, careers guidance and other support services for young people. The youth labour market also differs considerably from place to place, due partly to the history, culture and traditions of different nations, and the varying demand for different forms of labour across Europe. It is therefore important to remember that the causes of youth unemployment are rooted in social and economic factors at least as much as the characteristics, skills and abilities of individual young people - and there has, over time, been a secular decline in the demand for young people's labour across Europe and further afield (Fergusson and Yeates, 2021).

Either way, many NEET young people face considerable barriers to participation. Individual barriers include young people's skills, knowledge and qualifications; their motivation and commitment to education and work; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; and their physical and mental health. Other significant barriers include the influence of family and friends; the accessibility and quality of advice and guidance services; and, perhaps most importantly, the availability of appropriate education, training and other opportunities. But, for many young people, their attitudes, opinions and levels of motivation and commitment often derive, at least in part, from repeated negative experiences of education, work and other aspects of social life. In other words, there is a two-way interaction between a young person's individual characteristics and the social and economic circumstances in which they are located - a relationship captured, to some extent, in Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory.

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The NEET category is made up of young people from a variety of different backgrounds, but those living in deprived circumstances are particularly prone to becoming NEET and remaining outside education and work for lengthy periods of time. These young people often face substantial barriers to participation, and getting them back into education and work can be challenging - especially when meaningful opportunities are limited. It is, however, important to note that there are a number of factors which can make a real difference to NEET young people, especially in terms of helping them to access mainstream education and training. Our data, for example, show that the availability (or

absence) of grants, bursaries and travel allowances are often significant in either encouraging or inhibiting participation.

Our research also suggests that the learning mentor can often make a real difference to NEET young people, especially in terms of helping them to move into mainstream education and training - and remain there. Some young people's lives are complicated and many of them will have had negative experiences of education; a history of difficult relationships, especially with authority; and some may lack financial and emotional support from family and others. This is where the role of the mentor is often vital: the *ITER* research suggests that the way mentors support marginalised young people can often make a real difference in helping them to make successful transitions into mainstream education and training. A significant part of this is about trying to 'match' provision to young people's abilities and interests, and working with individuals' strengths and abilities as well as their shortcomings. Such an approach means that young people are more likely to get onto the right provision in the first place - in other words, training at the right level which reflects their capabilities, interests and ambitions. But it also helps prevent them from dropping out once they have started participating.

The *ITER* project raised a number of other issues. Overwhelmingly, those who took part in the research emphasised the importance of continuing mentor support even after a young person has entered mainstream provision. This might entail practical help such as liaising with training providers, employers and support services; or helping young people to solve financial, logistical and other material barriers to participation. It may, however, also include providing reassurance, encouragement and emotional support. In others words, continuing to act as an advocate and supporter once a young person has moved into mainstream education and training can significantly increase the likelihood of their transition being successful.

Undoubtedly, all this can be complex and demanding, and we must not underestimate the extra work entailed in providing such support. But whilst there is no 'silver bullet' which will guarantee success, the *ITER* research suggests that mentors who 'go the extra mile' can sometimes make a real difference in producing positive outcomes for NEET young people.

References

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